

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 290

CS 203 267

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 TITLE Unconventional Internships for English Majors.
 PUB DATE 76
 NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the 1976 Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Business; *Career Education; Career Opportunities; Educational Philosophy; *English Programs; Government (Administrative Body); Higher Education; *Internship Programs; *Program Descriptions; Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

After five years of research, the English department at St. Cloud (Minnesota) State University created an internship program for English majors. The philosophy behind the program is that the typical experience of the English major in college is excellent preparation for what the college graduate will be doing in most careers in business, government, and paragonovernmental organizations. The problem facing the university is to develop strategies that will give graduates the chance to enter those vocations for which they are qualified. This paper explains how the internship program works, describes the experiences of two interns, and discusses the characteristics of businesses that are the best sources of internships. (LJR)

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UNCONVENTIONAL INTERNSHIPS FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

On January 19, 1977, employment listings at the placement office of St. Cloud State University included a vacancy notice with somewhat unusual wording. A St. Paul firm seeking a management candidate announced: "Applicants should possess a degree in Business Administration, Management, English, or other business related degree." Because the notice was signed by a personnel manager on whom the English Department job adviser had called a number of times, the inclusion of English in the short list of "business related" degrees might well represent a minor victory. Persuading business leaders to accept the English major as good preparation for a business career has been one of the goals of the internship program at St. Cloud State from the beginning. A personal call on a business leader by a member of the English Department provides the opportunity to sell the values of the English major while discussing the possibility of an internship in the business. Such personal interviews in the field also provide the English Department with direct information about the job market in Minnesota. The present internship program for English majors at St. Cloud State is the outgrowth of five years of field research. To members of the academic world, some of the internships developed seem unconventional. They should not.

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Although English teachers tend to think of the English major as suitable only for future English teachers and writers, they have long given assent to the position that English is at the center of the humanities, and that the humanities prepare one to cope with a variety of life situations. Many college English teachers have read Cardinal Newman's The Idea of a University, with its great seventh discourse on the truly vocational nature of a liberal education. Others have encountered similar ideas in Irving Babbitt's Literature and the American College. Some may recall Whyte's argument for more liberally-trained business executives in his popular The Organization Man. If one adds to these the works of Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and their disciples, it is difficult to understand why college English teachers consider an internship in retail store management or in life insurance sales to be inappropriate for an English major; but they do. Nevertheless, English Department internships at St. Cloud State assume that what typically happens to the English major in college is excellent preparation for what the college graduate will be doing in most careers in business, government, and paragovernmental organizations.

According to the testimony of English graduates who have become government investigators, bankers, sales persons, corporation executives, and so forth, the study of literature has given them much practical knowledge of human nature, and the study of written composition has given them the ability to communicate well (See The Careers of English Majors, NCTE, 1965). Precisely these qualities

are most needed in leaders and diplomats, and the many expanding business empires of our time need such leaders and diplomats. The consulates and copra plantations of the British Empire were staffed by Oxford and Cambridge graduates in history and the classics. English graduates are well-suited to staff the empires of Sears, Prudential, General Motors, and Burger King, as well as such national organizations as Girl Scouts and YMCA. These are the empires of our time. Like the political empires of history, they require leaders (managers) and diplomats (sales representatives). Most modern empires have their own training programs to teach their own successful methods of operation, but they require suitable candidates for training.

There are many jobs in business, of course, that do require specialized knowledge in addition to leadership potential and the ability to learn quickly. One thinks particularly of finance, accounting, engineering, and computer technology. But there are even more jobs available that do not require prior specialized knowledge, that provide on-the-job training in the methods of the particular business, and that consequently have little real use for much of the course work in business schools. There are, in short, more than enough worthwhile careers open to English majors, careers for which those students are qualified. The problem of the university is to develop strategies that will give graduates the chance to enter those vocations for which they are qualified. The internship is one good way to provide such an opportunity.

Kris, for example, was four months away from graduation in February of 1976. She had an English major and a speech minor, with no teaching credential and no courses in business. She had read enough pessimistic descriptions of job prospects for liberal arts majors to lead her to the conclusion that she had nothing to offer an employer and little chance of getting a good job. She was open to almost any suggestion that could lead to a rewarding career. The personal data sheet she developed for her job search indicated that her principal work experience in summers had been as a waitress in her home town Holiday Inn. Her work record was excellent. A Minneapolis-based hotel chain was in the process of expanding from local to national operation, buying or building hotels in Vermont, Missouri, Georgia, Florida, and elsewhere. The chain needed to hire and train management personnel to standardize operations in the new units. Yet personnel administrators in the Minneapolis training hotels stated that they gave preference to graduates of hotel and restaurant management programs in nearby colleges; they were reluctant to hire liberal arts graduates. Kris did not interview for a job, however, but for a three-month internship in the last quarter of her senior year. Because the hotel was risking only the minimum wage for such an internship, Kris got the internship and began work in March. Within three weeks she had demonstrated her resourcefulness, her ability to learn quickly, her overall potential as a leader. From the first, her internship reports were excellent, her supervisors enthusiastic about her work. At the end of her internship, at graduation, she became

assistant manager of a large dining room and was accepted as a part of the hotel management team. In July she was already talking about a number of interesting options for which she was now eligible. And her success meant that other St. Cloud State English majors would get fair consideration for careers with that chain. One personnel manager said, "I must admit that I favored hotel/restaurant grads before we saw Kris. Now, if you send me more like Kris, I don't care what major they have."

In paying the minimum wage to an intern, the employer has little to lose. There is no permanent commitment on either side beyond the limits of the internship; yet each party has much to gain. The employer obviously has the opportunity to evaluate the intern in much more detail during a three-month supervised work assignment than in the typical two or three interviews for a job. The employee has the chance to gain a vision of the opportunities in a specific field, but without risking the disaster of entering a career, finding that it is not the right one, then suffering the embarrassment of failure. Most interns get job offers as a result of their internships. Those who do not have had the chance to test themselves and to gain confidence in their ability to perform important tasks. Some are offered jobs, refuse them, but gain something from the internship experience nevertheless.

Val, for example, was a junior with no specific career plans when she interviewed for a life insurance sales internship in 1975. Quiet, almost shy, but personable, intelligent, and determined, she passed a battery of tests and two interviews and began a spring internship with the home office sales force of a Twin City insurance

company. She studied for and passed the state license exam in the first two weeks, then began selling under supervision. Soon she was selling on her own, offering group insurance to small businesses in the Twin Cities and in her home town. She was so successful that she remained on the job during the summer, earning money for her senior year in college, then sold in the St. Cloud area on a part-time basis during her senior year in college. During that year she decided to go to law school after graduation, but she felt that her internship had done much for her. She told a group of English majors, "Before my internship, I thought of myself as just a student, with little confidence about the future. Now I know that I can succeed, for I am a licensed insurance agent and have already been successful in one profession. It's one I can always turn to if I change my mind about the law."

How the Internship Program Works

For the past five years one teacher in the English Department at St. Cloud State has been assigned as job adviser and internship supervisor. The program has developed steadily until now there are far more internships available than there are applicants; yet it requires only a modest amount of time to maintain the program and develop new internship possibilities. The internship supervisor teaches a full schedule of classes (three), but has one day free of classes to supervise and develop internships. With twelve days per quarter for internship supervision, he can easily visit all interns once each month, since there are never more than four or five interns out in any one quarter. Although he is on call in case of problems, he has seldom had to make more than the three standard visits during the internship. In such visits, he talks with the employer for a few minutes and with the intern for about half an hour. The intern keeps

a log of activities, observations, and reading related to the internship, and the supervisor and the intern use this log and the comments from the employer as the focus for their conference. The intern and the employer do not have their work interrupted for long, and the only report required of the employer is a detailed letter of recommendation for the intern at the end of the internship. Any other contacts between supervisor and employer, including arrangements for applicant interviews, are made by phone, on the university WATS line. By keeping the entire process simple, the supervisor spends little more time on this assignment than he might otherwise spend on a standard department committee task.

The letter of recommendation is the important outcome of the internship, for the employer is asked to evaluate the intern as a potential manager, career salesperson, public relations assistant, etc. rather than as a worker at the sort of routine jobs most college students have had. Even though internships sometimes involve a good deal of basic kinds of tasks, the employers think of the interns as prospective career persons and evaluate them on that basis. Both employers and interns praise the internship experience.

The intern receives up to one full quarter's credits under an all-university course number for internships. Although an internship in the English Department is carried as English 457 for credit purposes, the credits do not count toward the major, the minor, or general education requirements for graduation. They are counted simply as general electives. All humanities departments at State use this method of accounting for internships; they feel that one quarter out of twelve in the student's college program can logically be used for career preparation, and the internship is very direct preparation for a career.

Good Sources of Internships

Much time was wasted in the first two or three years of the program in finding those businesses that were most promising and in eliminating those that were least suitable for careers for English majors and for internships. Although no door has been closed for the future, the internship supervisor has developed a list of characteristics that fit the best sources of internships and spends most of his time in visiting businesses that fit those characteristics.

First, he looks for businesses that are expanding rapidly. No matter how large a business may be, it is not likely to experiment with an internship program if it does not plan to hire anyone. On the other hand, an expanding business is likely to consider a new approach to meeting its basic needs for new leaders.

Second, the business should offer a training program for career people. Fortunately, most businesses do, particularly those that meet the first and third characteristics.

Third, it should be a business that has developed its own formulas for success and that is now in the process of reproducing its original model by teaching those formulas to new leaders for new stores. Clearly such businesses are more likely to hire liberal arts graduates than are those businesses that wish to hire technical knowledge from outside to develop major internal changes.

Fortunately for English majors, these characteristics describe many businesses today, particularly large businesses. They also describe many paragonovernmental organizations and, of course, various kinds of government organizations. Inasmuch as federal, state, and major local government jobs depend on civil service examinations,

they are already open to English majors, and internships are of less value in such cases. The best prospects for internships, and for careers for English majors, seem to be in the organizations described below.

Chain Stores. They represent the kinds of empires that dominate American business today. Internships are most likely in newer, expanding chains, but the oldest and biggest offer career opportunities. Big chains always have Harvard Business School grads, or their equivalents, at the top, tinkering with the success formula and adapting it to changing times; but they need thousands of ready learners to apply the success formula in individual stores and departments. Some may give preference to business grads, but they look for potential leaders first, business knowledge second. Sears, Wards, Woolworth, Penney, Gamble, Walgreens, Safeway, and the smaller chains need new leaders. St. Cloud State has internships with department, drug, grocery, jewelry, and clothing chains; others are available.

Franchise Businesses. The U. S. Department of Commerce has published a book of more than two hundred pages listing available franchises, from barber shops to employment agencies. Some of the best known are fast food restaurants, many of them growing by almost unbelievable numbers each year, with ample investment capital behind them, just waiting for enough trained managers to warrant building new restaurants. St. Cloud State has internship arrangements with Burger King, Perkins Cake and Steak, Embers Restaurants, Holiday Inn, Farrell's Ice Cream Parlours, Bridgeman's, and a few local franchise operations. They pay well, promote fast, and require about the same abilities in their managers as would be typical of successful

teachers. St. Cloud State has been training teachers for a hundred years; the shift is relatively slight.

Paragovernmental Organizations. United Way offices themselves and most United Way organizations are national or regional in their application of standard operating procedures. Just as Burger King has a model restaurant for its short-term management school in Minnesota, the Boy Scouts have a model scout office for training sessions in New Jersey, and so on. Students who find it difficult to become interested in business careers should investigate the opportunities in Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Campfire Girls, YWCA, YMCA, Big Brothers-Big Sisters, United Way, the American Red Cross, and so forth. Most have national placement offices, and even an unpaid internship in the local United Way office is a good step toward a worthwhile career. St. Cloud State has had internships in such organizations for four years, as well as in hospitals and nursing homes. (Some states require special college programs for nursing home administrators, however.)

Life Insurance Sales. Along with other kinds of investment sales organizations, almost every life insurance company in the United States is looking hard for salespersons. The financial rewards are good, frequently with guaranteed salaries in the early months or years, and insurance companies offer training programs on a systematic basis. Students need to be sold on the possibility of doing good in selling life insurance, however. Few of them have reflected that in selling life insurance to a family with badly-managed finances, they may be selling more than just financial security; they are selling self respect. Students who might enjoy

helping people on welfare might also gain satisfaction in keeping them off welfare by selling them good insurance programs.

The internship program at St. Cloud State still has problems to solve, but it is accomplishing something. No English major at St. Cloud State who takes an internship is likely to be on the list of unemployed. There are good jobs available, and the internship is a good bridge to those jobs.

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